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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AGRICULTURE MINISTER SKAFF CONFIDENT OF
OPPOSITION ELECTORAL VICTORY

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In an August 7 courtesy call by Charge Grant, Agriculture Minister Elie Skaff emphasized the importance of the 2009 parliamentary elections, while downplaying the upcoming National Dialogue, in solving Lebanon's problems. Nevertheless, he recommended enlarging the membership of the Dialogue. Skaff is allied with opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun and received one of the five cabinet seats allotted to Aoun's bloc. He credited the March 14 majority's increased cooperation with him and others in the opposition to a perception that the U.S. has reduced its unconditional support for March 14, support which Skaff and allies often complained kept March 14 from agreeing to compromise, coupled with a distancing from March 14 by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt.

2. (C) Skaff remarked that his ally Aoun is eyeing the parliamentary elections as a way to become "more powerful than the president," if his party gains more seats. Explaining Aoun's alliance to Hizballah as one of "sincerity," Skaff said Aoun's Christian followers and Shia have united due to a threat of Sunni domination. Skaff outlined his priorities to boost the agricultural sector and meet farmers' needs over the next nine months. End summary.

WITHOUT FULL USG BACKING,
MARCH 14 MORE COOPERATIVE

3. (C) In an August 7 courtesy call by Charge Grant, accompanied by PolOff, Agriculture Minister Elie Skaff expressed his satisfaction with the cabinet formation and ministerial statement. Opposition-aligned Skaff characterized the political atmosphere as "much more civilized" than before. Though it may take a long time to solve problems, he continued, we do solve them. Skaff was not in the 2005-08 Siniora cabinet, but was also Agriculture Minister in the 2004-05 Karame government.

4. (C) He credited what he perceived to be a decline in U.S. support for March 14 as forcing the March 14 alliance to become more cooperative. He also cited Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's distancing himself a bit from March 14 as another contributing factor. He urged the U.S. to maintain positive

relations with all groups. (Comment: Skaff, who is allied with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's bloc, gave a different explanation for his alliance with Hizballah than what we usually hear from Aounies, who deem it a "marriage of convenience." Skaff instead portrayed the alliance with the Shia in general as one of "sincerity" and a "guarantee of protection," believing that the Sunnis pose a threat to minority Christians and Shias. End comment.)

NATIONAL DIALOGUE
LESS IMPORTANT THAN ELECTIONS

¶5. (C) Dismissing the importance of the National Dialogue, Skaff said the elections would provide the "real solutions" to Lebanon's problems. He suggested enlarging the membership of the Dialogue, believing that having the same participants as before will result in the same problems. Former MP and minister Suleiman Franjeh, former President Emile Lahoud, and former PM Salim Hoss should be included, Skaff suggested, and Defense Minister Elias Murr could replace his father, MP Michel Murr. Skaff noted that President Sleiman was opposed to altering the membership.

AOUN EYEING SOMETHING MORE
POWERFUL THAN THE PRESIDENCY

¶7. (C) Skaff relayed that Aoun, at last accepting that he is not the president, has determined that if his party could gain more parliamentary seats in the 2009 elections, then he

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will be more powerful than if he were president. "Then he can begin cleaning up this country," Skaff stated.

¶8. (C) Skaff was confident that the opposition will prove victorious in the elections, "if there are no surprises." He dismissed the likelihood of facing competition in his home area of Zahle, explaining that the Christians there did not traditionally support "extremist" Christians, because they live in close proximity to Muslims and want to preserve good relations with everyone. By extremist, he meant March 14 Christian leaders Samir Geagea and Amine Gemayal.

SYRIA MAY BOOST SLEIMAN

¶9. (C) Believing that Syria is ready to treat Lebanon as an equal partner as long as President Sleiman is in power, Skaff hoped Syria would "give something" to Sleiman during his upcoming trip to Damascus. If Syria does not, he continued, it will lose Sleiman.

SEVERAL PROJECTS PLANNED
FOR NEXT NINE MONTHS

¶10. (C) Skaff discussed his ministry's priorities prior to the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. He inquired about the possibility of receiving USAID assistance to supply chilling storage facilities for potatoes in the Bekaa Valley. Skaff also plans to focus on an already-funded project to expand water holes that collect snowfall to use for irrigation, fighting forest fires, and supplementing the country's receding water basin.

¶11. (C) He is also interested in accelerating "agriculture extension," suggesting, in particular, employing engineers to educate farmers with growing tips and the use of pesticides, with the goal of exporting goods to Europe. He further mentioned milk collection, new plant growth, insuring against bionatural hazards, and implementation of an agribank to assist farmers, which he noted PM Fouad Siniora opposed. Skaff asked about USG assistance in providing equipment to shred dry brush which could then be reused as composting

material.

¶12. (C) Skaff stressed the importance of agriculture and meeting farmers' needs, arguing that dissatisfied farmers could choose to migrate to cities instead, where they may not find jobs. Commenting that his ministry has a history of corruption, Skaff reported that he brought in "honest" individuals to oversee the ministry.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) This is the first we have heard about trying to expand the National Dialogue to include groups not represented in the last such Dialogue in 2006. Three of the persons Skaff mentioned are strongly pro-Syrian (Suleiman Franjeh, Emile Lahoud, Salim Hoss) so we hope that President Sleiman keeps the membership as it was. End Comment.

GRANT